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## BOOKS &amp; THE ARTS

## Politics and the Black Novel

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A people's fiction is a cultural genetic code, a double helix of the spirit. It does not always reflect how people act, but rather how they feel about action. In America, violent action has been morally sanctioned for a long time—at least certain kinds of violent action, committed under certain auspices. Some of our best, and some of our worst, literature is full of it.

But not all the forms of American literature have contained violence. The literature of the black man, at least up to 1940, was relatively free of it. As Richard Dorson shows us, the American Negro's folk tales tell of Old Marster and John, of hoodoos, horrors, wonders and fools. His spirituals sing of escape from slavery. The oratory of the post-bellum black preacher advocates Christian patience. The lyrics of the blues sardonically describe an existence of pain and thwarted love. And the scant fiction published up to 1940 gives little space to the depiction of violence.

Violence is always there in the black's literature, of course, but it is submerged. Even in a novel whose subject is violence, like Arna Bontemps' *Black Thunder*, about Gabriel Prosser's slave rebellion, there is a kind of film between the reader and the bloodletting. Criddle, one of the rebels, eagerly anticipates running his sword through a white girl, but at the crucial moment Bontemps switches his camera to another scene. And when Gabriel kills a white guardsman, we have to read the passage again to make sure that this is what has actually happened.

Not until Richard Wright published *Native Son* in 1940 did we have a black novelist who used an act of violence as the central motif of a long narrative, and depicted that act in explicit detail. When Bigger Thomas murders Mary Dalton and feeds her dismembered body to the furnace, the crash through the barriers of tradition is loud and disturbing. Violence enters black American fiction. In the next twenty years, more and more black novelists disengage themselves from the old cautiousness. Ellison's narrator in *Invisible Man* throws

Ras the Exhorter's check, and beats off his would-be captors with a leg chain. Willard Motley's Nick Romano, in *Knock on Any Door*, empties a pistol into the body of a policeman. Lesser known novelists show lawless bands of Southern vigilantes lynching and shooting blacks, Northern police beating blacks unconscious on the streets, and mobs of whites attacking blacks in race riots. They show angry black men beating their women, or killing them, and petty black gangsters gunning down frightened ghetto dwellers.

These post-1940 novelists depict three kinds of violence—that committed by whites against blacks, that committed by blacks against one another, and that committed by blacks against whites or against blacks working for whites. Toward the first, the attitude of the novelists is powerful outrage; toward the second it is painful frustration over blacks fighting one another. These two kinds of violence seem familiar, even though they were not dealt with explicitly in novels before 1940. And the moral objections toward them are only what we would expect. The third kind of violence, however, with only one or two exceptions, is unique to the years after 1940, and its appearance is accompanied by the emergence of a highly significant attitude.

When a black person kills a white person in these novels, it is in large part the fulfillment of a desire long repressed. More important, the act embodies strong moral value. An attack upon a white person or his black representative is an attack upon a symbol of racism and oppression. Ann Petry's Lutie Johnson, in *The Street*, bludgeons a black man to death when he tries to rape her in preparation for turning her over to the rich white Harlem gangster who employs him. She does not kill a black man, though; she kills "the white world which thrust black people into a walled enclosure from which there was no escape." Such an attack is a claim for the black man's identity and worth as a person. "I didn't know," says Bigger Thomas, "I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em. . . ." Nick Romano, who is white, but who suffers from the same pressures as his black slum neighbors, is glad he killed the policeman and would do it

The powerful desire to retaliate in kind against a hitherto immune tyrant is supported by the firm conviction that the black grievance is just and that God approves of retaliation. Speaking at the funeral of the title character of John O. Killens' *Youngblood*, a preacher says, ". . . We're going to make them pay one day soon, the ones that're responsible. There's going to be a reckoning day right here in Georgia and we're going to help God hurry it up." Striking back almost inevitably brings death or the ruin of one's life. Bigger and Nick are executed; Lutie must abandon the child for whom she killed. But the act of violence is not futile. The willingness to commit violence suggests an important awakening among blacks, an awakening referred to again and again in these novels. Violence for the novelists is not only moral; it is the indispensable tool for achieving selfhood.

Yet, violence still seems alien to them, as if they cannot quite shake that pre-1940 tradition. Killens ends *Youngblood* and William Russell ends *A Wind Is Rising*, both of which depict white violence committed against innocent blacks, not with an organization of an underground and an armed attack against their murderers, but with the statement of a determination on the part of the protagonists to establish a union and to work through the avenues of appeal created and dominated by whites. James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* contains a strong pattern of violent imagery but no literal violence. And some novelists explicitly reject violence. The protagonist of Willard Savoy's *Alien Land* thinks, "Violence! The possibility, the bare possibility of a riot. He turned from these things." The Invisible Man goes underground to escape the riot developing above him in Harlem.

These novelists are simply not white enough to feel comfortable with violence, even though they can morally justify its use and even though it pervades their personal lives. The white and the black came to this continent at about the same time. But unlike black men, white men stormed in, cutting down trees and Indians, changing river channels, shouldering back the frontier, fighting one another and everyone else bloody. This is not to say that blacks did not participate in this violent response to a virgin land; it's just that violence was not as much with the whites, their mode

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